

Learning to love later Latin

Mark Walker

In this article Mark Walker makes the case for ranging beyond the Classical period to savour the Latin of later authors. Latin continued to be used to write history, poetry, science, inscriptions, and much else through the medieval period, into the Renaissance and Enlightenment, and even into the present day, as some of the examples printed overleaf show.

If we pause a moment to consider that Latin not only survived the fall of the Roman Empire, but that it positively flourished as the language of the church, the state, and of intellectual life throughout the middle ages, the Renaissance and into our modern era, then it might strike us as more than a little surprising that the current Classics curriculum all but ignores this superabundant and astonishingly diverse resource. Even if we confine our attention to the narrow limits of the British Isles, post-Roman Latin has an historical and inter-disciplinary importance that Classicists ignore at their peril. Here are just a few, a very few, examples.

Later Latin history

Most primary sources for British history up to, roughly, the end of the fourteenth century are Latin – from Gildas and Bede, who tell so memorably of the coming of the Saxons and the arrival of Christianity, to post-Conquest accounts of the Anglo-Norman chroniclers such as Roger of Wendover and Matthew Paris. The Battle of Hastings, the signing of the Magna Carta (itself an important later Latin text), the Crusades, the Anarchy of King Stephen's reign, and so many famous stories, too – King Cnut attempting to hold back the waves, Lady Godiva riding through Coventry, the murder of Thomas Becket (there's a gory eyewitness account of that by one Edward Grim). And some of the best stories ever told are to be found in Geoffrey of Monmouth's fabulous *History*, the original source for the tale of King Leir and his three daughters that caught Shakespeare's eye, as well as accounts of King Arthur, his birth, life, battles, and death, and (as reproduced here) an account of the foundation of London – material that forms the backbone of the celebrated 'Matter of Britain', the body of literature on the legendary history of our islands. And Geoffrey also introduced us to Merlin (pictured right)

and his book of prophecies, which, rather like those of Nostradamus, were still taken seriously as late as the eighteenth century.

Historians have long relied upon these writers, but Classicists have yet to embrace their importance as representatives of a living Latin tradition: these medieval chroniclers looked backwards to antiquity for their literary models, but in the process of writing about their own times created a style that was thoroughly contemporary. The best of them – like Gerald of Wales or Geoffrey of Monmouth – are masters of medieval Latinity.

Later Latin verse

Thanks to a multitude of musical settings, many Classicists may already have encountered some of the glories of accentual, rhyming medieval verse such as the *Dies Irae* of the Requiem Mass (try Mozart's and Verdi's thunderous accounts of this day of judgement poem) or the great *Stabat Mater Dolorosa* hymn (Pergolesi), not forgetting the *Carmina Burana* poems made famous by the 20th-century composer Carl Orff (listen to his *O Fortuna* on Spotify or YouTube if you think you don't know it, and you'll find that in fact you do).

Fewer will be aware of the rich tradition of Latin verse writing that has continued over the centuries and has survived (albeit precariously) to the present day. After the medieval period (an astonishingly rich source of Latin verse, both classical and non-classical), the fourteenth century saw a revival of classical verse writing with the Latin poetry of the Italian scholar-poet Petrarch, whose example was followed in Britain by such poets as George Buchanan, Thomas Campion, George Herbert, and Elizabeth Weston. Latin plays enjoyed some popularity, too, thanks to the influence of Seneca's tragedies, and Thomas Legge's 1579 *Ricardus Tertius* may very well have had

an impact on Shakespeare's vernacular version. As for comedy, there is George Ruggle's 1614 *Ignoramus* (yes, that is where we get the word), with its hilarious macaronic mixture of Latin and English – centuries before 'Franglais' was invented. Milton wrote a great deal of youthful Latin verse, and by the eighteenth century the tradition was well established – Joseph Addison, Jonathan Swift, Thomas Gray, and Samuel Johnson, among many others, were all Latin versifiers. Study of how neo-Latin poets such as Vincent Bourne in the 18th century or Walter Savage Landor in the 19th adapted classical models to suit the temperament of their own times reveals much about changing attitudes to antiquity.

Scientific Neo-Latin

Almost entirely neglected is the corpus of scientific Latin, under which heading we might include some of the most important books ever published in any language: Copernicus' statement of the heliocentric theory (*De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, 1543); Galileo's discovery of the moons of Jupiter (*Sidereus Nuncius*, 1610); William Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood (*De Motu Cordis et Sanguinis in Animalibus*, 1628); and, most important of all, Newton's elucidation of the laws of motion and gravity (*Principia Mathematica*, 1687). Latin was thought to be the appropriate language for scientific discourse, in part because it allowed universal circulation throughout Europe.

In the thirteenth century, Roger Bacon used Latin to describe a variety of astonishing things in his *Opus Maius*: gunpowder, microscopes, telescopes, and ships powered by steam, and gave the correct explanation for the phenomenon of the rainbow. His namesake Francis Bacon propounded the inductive method of reasoning, the cornerstone of modern science, in his *Novum Organum* of 1620. Such texts offer Classicists an extraordinary chance to become truly inter-disciplinary, to examine how these writers were influenced by or reacted to ancient writers such as Ptolemy, Pliny, Galen and Hyginus, and to show how this scientific-Latin discourse has defined our modern intellectual climate.

An exciting opportunity

With many of these texts now freely available on the internet (try <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/neo.html> or <http://classicalanthology.theclassicslibrary.com/later-latin/medieval-poetry/>), there has never been a better time to explore the treasures of later Latin. In the classroom, teachers might enjoy, for example, introducing students to Geoffrey's Latin version of the King Leir story and comparing it with Shakespeare's treatment – for which sterling service they might also earn the gratitude of their colleagues in the Eng. Lit. department! If those who determine the Classics curriculum could be persuaded to provide appropriate teaching resources (for example, good, annotated editions of later Latin writers, or well-chosen anthologies for classroom use), then Latin lessons of the future could include examples of texts written over a period of 2,000 years or more – what better way for Classicists to demonstrate the centrality of their discipline to the whole of Western history and culture?

Aside from the intrinsic interest of the stories they have to tell, these later Latin texts represent a bridge across the centuries, a bridge that directly connects the Roman era with our own. By studying later Latin and its sometimes convoluted relation to its classical parent, Classicists are uniquely placed to examine precisely how instrumental the language and thought of the ancients has been at every crucial stage in the development of our modern world. It is an exciting opportunity.

Mark Walker is Head of Classics at St John's Beaumont School. He has translated a lot of Latin into English (including a verse translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's 12th-century poem Life of Merlin), and a lot of English into Latin, including the passage on the opposite page – can you guess where it is from?

He is also the editor of 'Vates: The Journal of New Latin Poetry', a fine resource available to all absolutely free (<http://pineapplepubs.snazzystuff.co.uk/vates.htm>).

Excerpt from *Stabat Mater Dolorosa* (c. 13th century).

The *Stabat Mater*, an account of Mary at the foot of the cross watching the suffering of her Son, has been variously attributed to Jacopone da Todi (c. 1228–1306), Pope Innocent III (c. 1160–1216), and St Bonaventura (d. 1274), but its authorship remains unknown for certain. The *Stabat Mater*, like the great *Dies Irae* of the Requiem, is a poem designed to be sung – originally to a plainchant melody. Its

depiction of and sensitive empathy with the sufferings of a mother has inspired many composers over the centuries, from Palestrina to Rossini and Dvorak.

Each of the twenty stanzas has three lines; while each pair of stanzas rhymes in the pattern AAB CCB.

*Stabat Mater dolorosa,
iuxta crucem lacrimosa,
dum pendebat Filius.*

*Cuius animam gementem,
contristantem et dolentem,
pertransivit gladius.*

*O quam tristis et afflicta
Fuit illa benedicta
Mater Unigeniti.*

*Quae maerebat et dolebat,
et tremebat cum videbat
nati poenas incliti.*

*Quis est homo qui non fleret
Christi Matrem si videret
in tanto supplicio?*